ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUES REPUBLISHED ON MICROFICHE

Published on microfiche by: Somerset House, 417 Maitland Avenue, Teaneck, New Jersey 07666.

Date of publication and production of master: 1975.

Series: The purpose of this series is to make available those catalogues that have lasting interest through their text or their illustrations. Catalogues and cumulations of titles in the series are available from the publishers.

Serial numbers: Each title is given a seven-figure serial number in the top right-hand corner of the microfiche title strip. This is an accession number. The first figure indicates the number of the list in which the title first appears. The first three-figure group signifies the gallery or museum, the second three-figure group signifies the accession number for that title.

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Technical data: Producing laboratory: NCR Corporation, Beltsville, Maryland 20705.

JANKEL ADLER

EXHIBITION

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1959

JANKEL ADLER

GALERIE CHALETTE 1100 MADISON AVENUE NEW YORK

INTRODUCTION

Jankel Adler's pictures are his autobiography. Indupitably, this DERACINE who had a homeland neither in Poland nor in Germany, neither in France nor in Britain; who lost a substantial segment of his finished work through the madness of racialism or the ravages of war, and barely saved his very life from destruction; who, while he never lacked appreciation by a few astute minds and clairvoyant eyes, was denied popular success because the intensity and ecstasy of his vision was and is too disquieting for those who « like what they know », and because his unique combination of abstraction and humanism could not be neatly pigeonholed as Cubist, Surrealist, or Expressionist.

Adler was a quiet, unobtrusive person, unconcerned with publicity, and reluctant to give interviews or to make public appearances. Though he might have occasional outbursts of anger, he was, on the whole, amazingly unembittered, despite the fact that he had been hounded by fate from country to country, and that he received insufficient compensation for his work. « The brightness of his eye and the penetration with which it was fixed upon one » characterized for one friend « a great deal of strength and vitality ».

All of this strength and vitality can be found in his work, from the earthy, heavy unromantic figures of fellow-Jews he did as a young man in his native Poland, to the symbol-fraught semi-abstract configurations that culminate in the last, British decade of his not very long life. A much older man to whom Adler looked up in friendship and awe, the Swiss painter, Paul Klee, had the same eye penetrating the surface to the core of things. Adler did not have Klee's whimsicality, but the two men had in common a metaphysical flair coupled with a lyricism that

kept both the Helvetian and the Hasidic Pole away from and above the ferocious Expressionism of their contemporaries in Central Europe.

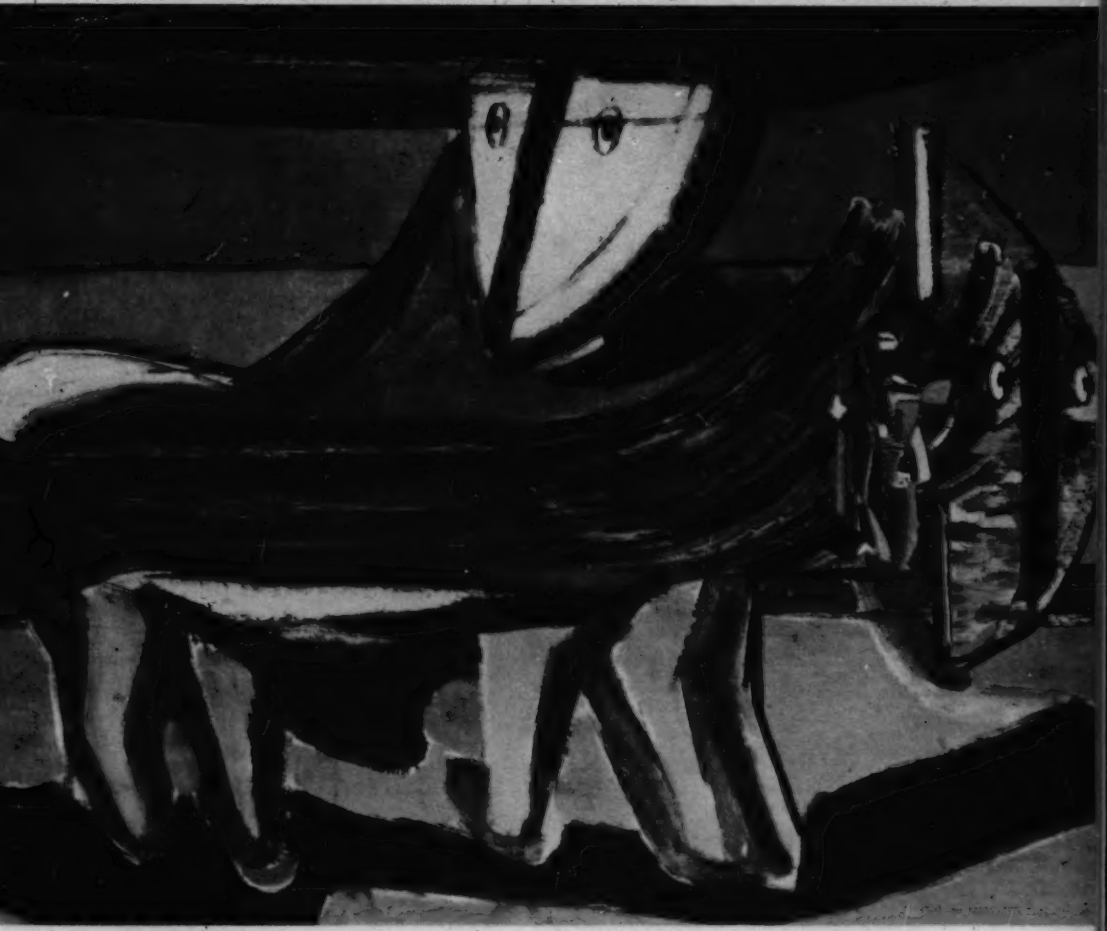
It is more appropriate to speak here of kinship rather that of imitation or even influence. At any rate, what Adler once wrote to sulogize Klee applies very well to himself, too:

« . . . In the quivering of a leaf he experienced the violence of a thunderstorm. Sometimes it would seem that his pictures extend to the other side of the canvas. We connect with his pictures not only with our eyes, but our whole skin becomes a sensitive surface of eye. We become the awareness of the barometer. Our sensibilities have been buried by the waste products of this life. Klee tock these crippled senses back to the air and the light ».

But while Klee in his last pictures came very close to pure abstraction, Adler apparently was, in its repudiation, more in agreement with the other contemporary artist whom he revered—Picasso. « You must always start 'with something», Picasso warned. Adler agreed, though, as he grew older, he was more and more concerned with problems of structure and organization, and less with traditional subject matter. He declared:

« Abstract painting can very easily become ornamental. Thus it is always a good thing to have in mind a realistic POINT DE DEPART. I think that every painter, when he paints, must believe that what he does is reality . . . This reality is a guide by which the painter may avoid losing himself in ornamental play ».

Adler could never be sufficiently escapist to forget the surrounding world. But it was a man-made world of grim conflict rather than the post-Impressionists' paradise of landscape, or the Cubists' harlequinade. As did the novelist, Franz Kafka, Adler concentrated his interest solely upon humanity—man quivering and shrieking beneath the smooth skin of existence. By the titles alone, one would think that Woman preemptied much of his thinking and yearning as an artist; she did—yet look: there ist nothing of Renoir's animal charm in the semi-abstract structure of



Adler's young girls, and as little sweetness in his VENUS of KIRKCUDBRIGHT as there is in Picasso's MUSE or the pre-historic Venus of Willendorf.

Once rebuked for standing between Picasso and Klee, Adler retorted, undismayed: «A very good place to stand». But if the relationship to Klee can hardly be denied, I can see only superficial similarities between the extrovert draftsman Picasso, and the truly «painterly» dreamer, Adler. In any event, Picasso's coloring is rarely memorable, where as Adler lavished the most glorious pigment on his deliberately rigid, scaffoldlike structures (black-and-white reproductions never give the right idea of his work). In fact, it is the contrast between his austere designs and utterly un-austere color that makes an «Adler» recognizable at first glance. Few artists have used color as successfully as he to communicate emotion and movement. Adler's colors, with the glow of enamel, grow out of a sad background of deep melancholy. His tile-like areas, with their golds, olives, purples, and vermilions, are reminiscent of the opulent Byzantine ikons he hung in his studio. The rich surfaces are generally enclosed by thick, heavy lines—like the strips of lead surrounding the glowing translucent glass of cathedral windows.

Adler left nothing to chance; there is no slovenliness, no indecision, no unnecessary detail in his meticulously constructed pictures. Again we are reminded of Kafka who, with as few words as possible, carefully created «realistic myths». Adler, with an astounding economy, has created a world which resembles the outer world, yet is not identified with it. Just as Kafka escaped from the tyranny of the world-maker by becoming his own world-architect, so Adler employed his colors to make a timeless mirror of this hateful and mortal world, a mirror more permanent and satisfying than that which is reflected.

And again Kafka comes to our mind when we recall how much thought and effort went into the construction of his novels, and how long and conscientiously the writer pondered about the requirements and possibilities of his craft. For Adler, too, made lenghty and painstaking preparations for each work, even if the final

execution was speedy and spontaneous, and the notes he left indicate a philosophical worrying over aesthetic problem. Thus, he offers a clue to his own manner of pictorial expression when he writes:

«Times of naturalism in art represent a low level shallowness which has much more to do with optical phenomena than with real art... the naturalistic painter has always painted with one eye, while his second eye has been used to attach himself to the object he has been painting. The viewer of such painting, too, has always used, not his feelings or emotions, but in his memory, has made comparison with the se-called reality.»

Note how little concern he had for «reality», remember the inwardness of his vision, and you will disagree with the emphasis put by some of his biographers on his national-religious background as a source of his inspiration. Indeed, one cannot help wondering whether those who insist they find «Semitic» roots in Adler's works would have found them had he adopted an Anglo-Saxon name and hidden from them his relatively few—mostly early—works with Jewish subject matter. For the sake of record, however, it might be recalled here that once upon a time he was praised for having successfully blended the mathematical clarity of the Talmud with the mysticism of the Kabbalah, while another critic, viewing his work, spoke of the majesty of Babylonion and Assyrian reliefs.

«Semitic», then, does not refer to certain known characteristics of the ECOLE JUIVE in Paris alone, and its most typical representative, Chaim Soutine. For in style and, we surmise, in character, Adler was the very antithesis of this man, though they both were born in Eastern European ghettoes only a fey month apart, and were to live solitary and not altogether happy lives in Western milieus. Where as Soutine's torment reveled in the bleeding, twisted flesh, in houses uprooted by an earthquake, in trees tossed by violent winds, Adler achieved the permanence and stability of stained-glass window designs, the lava of his color is controlled, the personal fire directed towards an almost classical monumentality.

On the whole, the reception Adler received during his lifetime by the press, and by the authorities of museums, was more enthusiastic than the one afforded by the public—which had, and still has, to scale countless obstacles to a full appreciation of Adler, that seeker of truth, who wanted to express on canvas all the troubles of the world, his lips trembling and his eyes wide open in mortal fear.

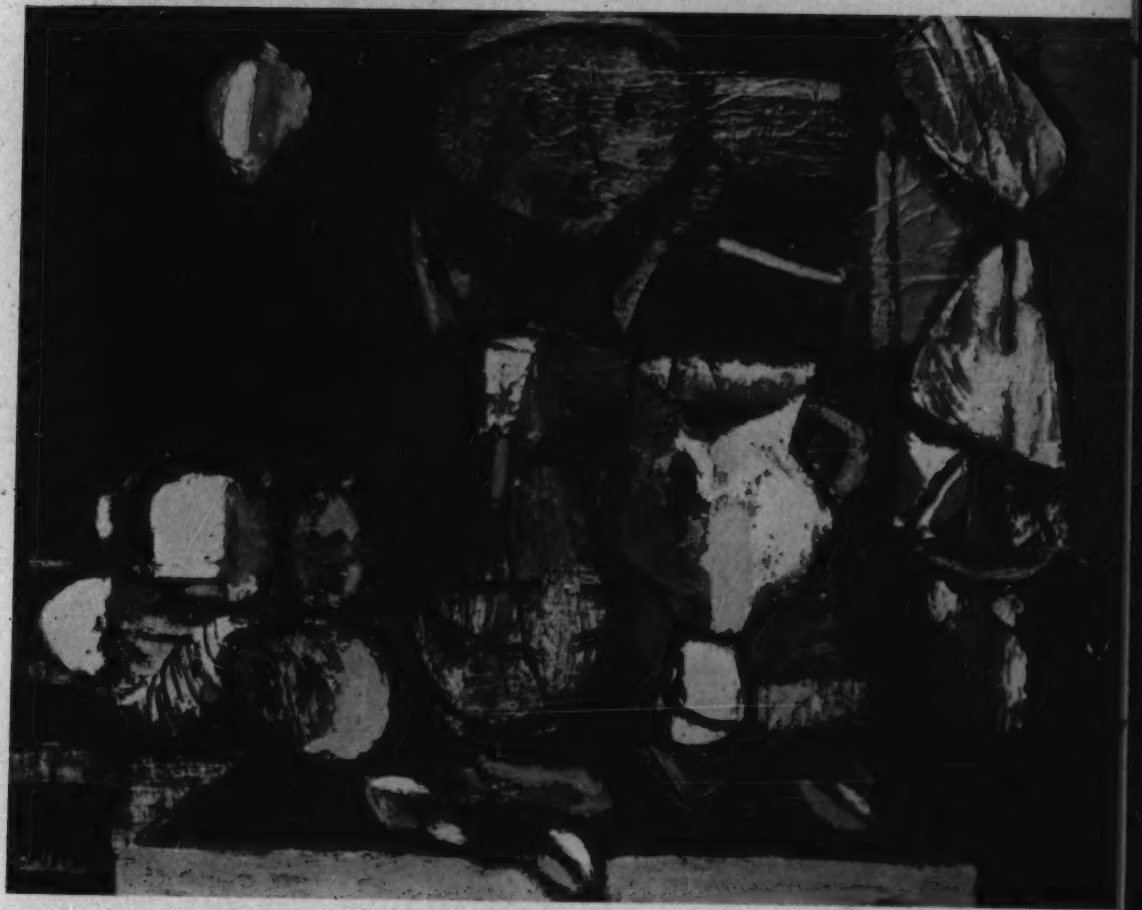
Of course, art does not attain all its ends in one single practitioner, and the imperfection that marks all human handicraft is necessarily visible in Adler's OEUVRE as well. Still—he sought as intensely as anyone else in his time to penetrate to the deeper significance of things, to reveal the experiences, not of his retina, but of his heart, to «infuse abstraction with the rich complexity of living things», as a British critic so aptly put it. At their least, there is chromatic poetry in the harmonies and contrasts produced by this hard-headed mystic, this Hasidic cosmopolitan, while at their heights his pictures come very close to a complete manifestation of being, elaborate yet at the same time simple, didactic yet ambiguous, tender, yet blubt.

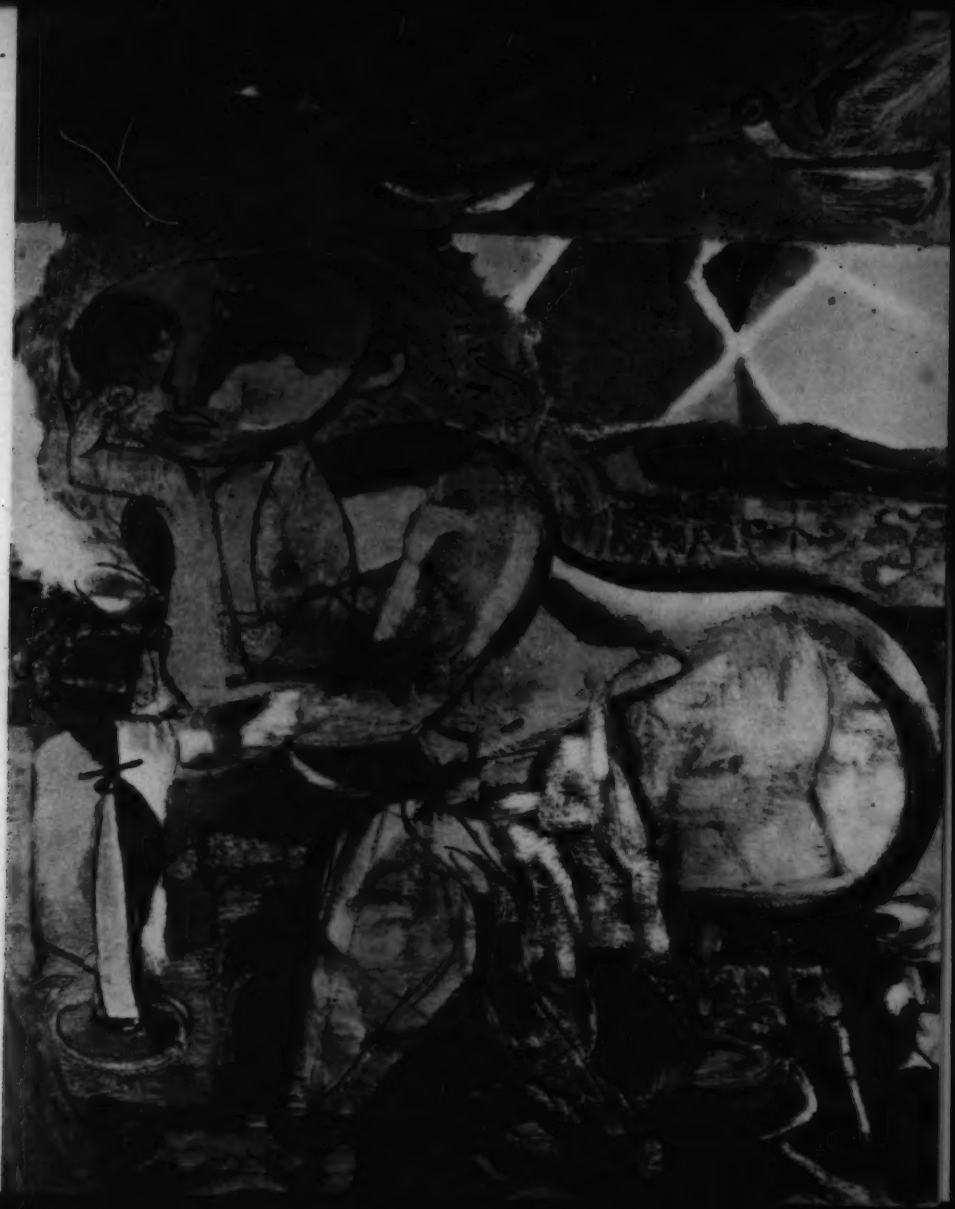
Perhaps the best summing-up of him and his endeavours would be in the words he found for his friend Klee:

«He had the courage to walk this clean-swept platform of the 20th century, and not continue in the shadow of Renaissance standards. He did not try to make a new shadow. He made a survey of this place for others who will come.»

October 1959

ALFRED WERNER





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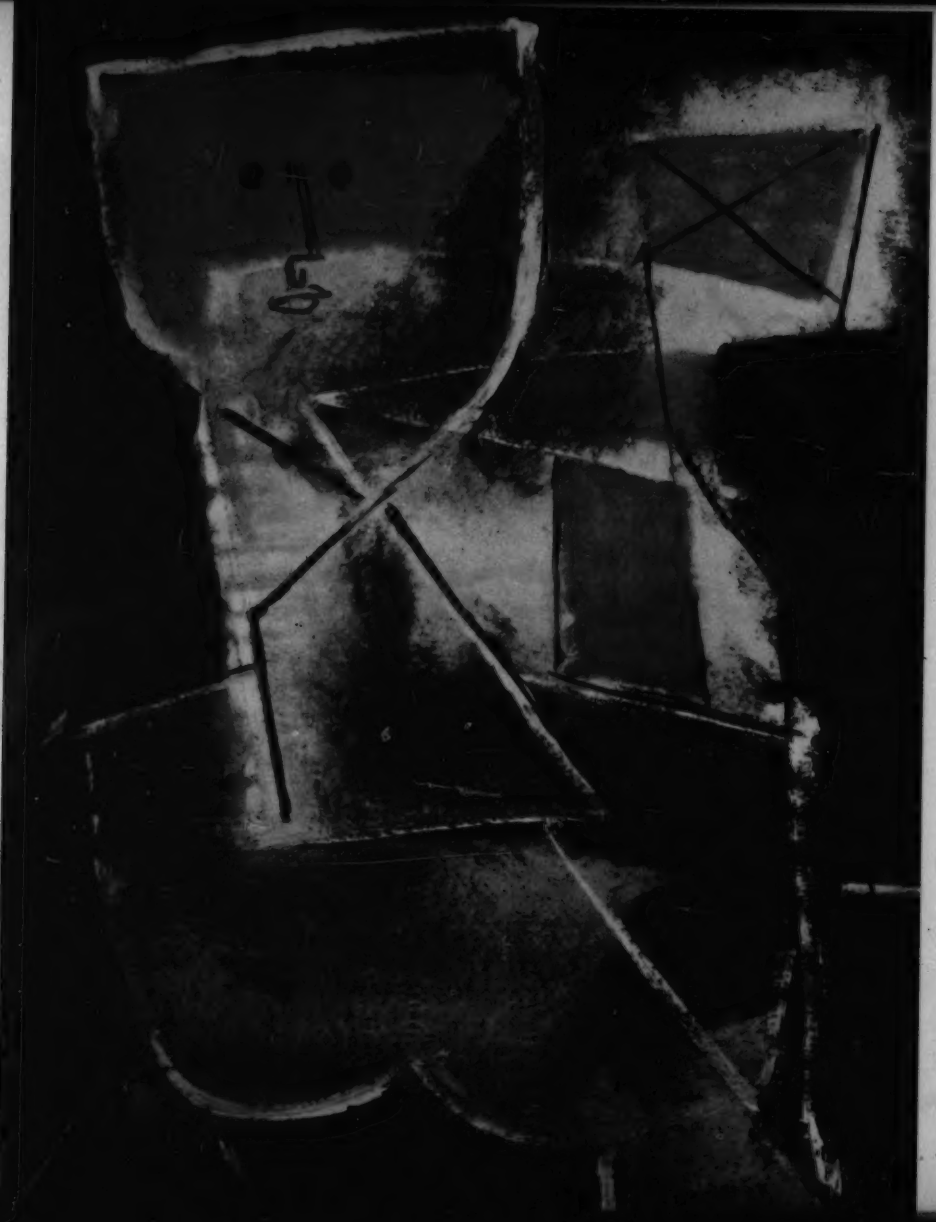

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CATALOGUE

1. Planting of Trees, 1937
   Oil, 55 x 37 inches
2. King David, 1945
   Oil, 50 x 34 inches
3. Homage to Kurt Schwitters, 1942
   Oil, 36 x 40 inches
4. Picture of a Girl, 1938
   Oil, 25½ x 21 inches
5. Head,
   Oil, 24 x 19 inches
6. Girl with Still Life, 1946
   Oil, 33 x 34 inches
7. Woman with Grapes, 1938–39
   Oil, 32 x 25 inches
8. Still Life, 1947
   Oil, 25 x 30 inches
9. Still Life
   Oil, 20 x 24 inches
10. Abstract,
    Oil, 25 x 19 inches
11. Bird with Lamp, 1945
    Oil, 37 x 31½ inches
12. Still Life
    Oil, 19½ x 25½ inches
13. Two Dogs, 1938
    Oil, 31½ x 39 inches
14. Composition, 1948
    Oil, 25 x 20 inches
15. Nude,
    Oil, 39 x 32 inches
16. Reclining Nude,
    Oil, 25 x 30 inches
17. Girl with Bird, 1946
    Oil, 36 x 25 inches
18. Still Life
    Oil, 30 x 20 inches

19. Woman with raised Hands,
Oil, 22½ x 31 inches

20. Treblinka, 1948
Oil, 60 x 36 inches
Collection: Gimpel Fils, London

21. Two Rabbis, 1942
Oil, 33⅞ x 44⅛ inches
Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York (Gift of Sam Salz)

22. Portrait Composition, 1947
Gouach, 19½ x 14 inches

23. Two Girls, 1947
Gouache, 18¾ x 13½ inches

24. Composition, 1947
Gouache, 14¾ x 19 inches

25. Figure, 1946
Watercolor, 10¾ x 16½ inches

26. Two Figures by a Table, 1943
Ink Drawing, 24 x 17 inches

27. Two Figures Standing,
Ink Drawing, 17½ x 12½ inches

28. Man standing by Window,
Ink Drawing, 18½ x 14 inches

Works by Jankel Adler
are in the following public
collections

Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Köln
Nationalgalerie, Berlin
Contemporary Art Society, London
Museum for Western Art, Moscow
Museum Narodowe, Warsaw
Museum Sztuki, Lódz
Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv
Bezalel Museum, Jerusalem

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1895 Born on July 26 in Tuszyn (near Lódz), Poland, as the seventh of ten children. His parents were of Jewish faith.

1909 Was sent to live with a married sister in Barmen (Rhineland), Germany; attended a private school there and studied drawing.

1911 Entered the Düsseldorf Academy where he remained until the outbreak of the first World War.

1914 Conscripted into the Russian army and taken into captivity by the Germans.

1918–1920 Released from captivity and returned to Warsaw. Exhibited in Warsaw and Lódz.

1920 Moved to Berlin and settled later in Düsseldorf.

1924 First trip to Paris.

1925 Received first important public commission for frescos to decorate the Düsseldorf Planetarium. This work was later destroyed by the Nazis.

1928 Was awarded "Gold Medal" by the city of Düsseldorf for the painting "Cats" which is today in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Köln, Germany.

1929 Travelled widely in Mallorca and Spain.

1931 Returned to Düsseldorf to teach at the Academy there.

1933 Fled to Paris, due to racial persecution by the Nazis.

1935 Went to Warsaw for large retrospective exhibition which included many works recovered from Düsseldorf by the Polish Government.

1937 Returned to Paris where he worked with S. W. Hayter in the "Atelier 17", settled later in Cagnes-sur-Mer.

1939–1940 Volunteered for Polish Army and transferred with Polish artillery to Scotland.

1941 Released from army on medical grounds, settled in Kircudbright, Scotland, and resumed painting activity which led to an exhibition in Glasgow.

1943 Moved to London and exhibited at Redfern Gallery.

1946–1948 Exhibited at Lefevre Gallery, London, Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, Gimpel Fils Gallery, London. Had first American exhibition at Knoedler Galleries, New York.

1949 Died on April 25th at Aldebourne, Wiltshire.